

Pam-India

Our Unfinished Task in Burma

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CAN you see it — this old Pagoda Land? Your bi-plane hangs over the Gulf of Martaban, 100 miles south of Rangoon; and the coast line of Burma twists before and about you like the right side of a script capital G. Pegu is near the upper right hand point, from which the Tenasserim coast, long and slender, reaches far to your rear. Ahead of you the wide Irrawaddy delta, rounding from east to west, almost in a semi-circle, forms the nearly horizontal curve of the G, ending on the west near Bassein. The west coast is the right hand line of the loop; but the rest — the left side of the loop and the little projecting stroke of the G — are lost in the Bay of Bengal.

In the distance ahead, stretching off north, you can with your best field glass just make out the six long parallel sections which make up the province, — three yomas (that is, literally, “main bones”) and three river valleys. On the west, from near Bassein, begins the Arakan yoma which extends north 400 miles into the Chin Hills that broaden out till they lose themselves in Assam on the northwest and China on the northeast. Just east of this section

and flanking it all the way to China, is the Irrawaddy valley. Then comes the Pegu yoma, mere play-mountains compared with those of the north and less than 300 miles long, and alongside them on the right is the Sittang river and valley. Next — the fifth section — lies the great eastern yoma, a huge bone indeed. From far south in Tenasserim it runs, at first narrow, then an enormous mountain-wall, reaching breadthwise into Siam and China on the east, and in the north joining the headwaters of the Irrawaddy and the spreading flank of the western yomas. The last of the parallel sections is the Salween river, sometimes splitting this eastern wall lengthwise and sometimes lying, as indeed does much of the yoma itself, in shadowy territory outside British jurisdiction.

Now look again from your vantage point 100 miles south of Rangoon. If you float slowly up over the delta, with your eyes open for Christian work, you will say "Ah ha! just as I thought. These Burma missionaries have made a deal of noise over nothing. Undermanned! Why, here in a space not 200 miles square are fourteen Baptist stations, not to mention Methodist, Anglican and Catholic. Beside China, this is crowded."

Hold on. Here's the very reason I'm writing this article. Just let me have a seat in you 'plane for a few hours and we'll see. Because Burma has been worked for 100 years and can show fourteen stations

in 40,000 square miles, is it therefore "crowded with missionaries?"

Suppose we start from Rangoon up the main railroad line in the fourth of those parallel sections. In the first political division, about the size of Maine, we shall find a million and a half Burman Buddhists. With all allowance for what is being done by native evangelists and the Burman Christian church one can not blame a missionary of this region for feeling that the Burmans are unevangelized, when he realizes that he is one of only four missionaries for the million and a half. And in the whole province there are still 7,400,000 Burmans reached just as imperfectly.

But if you think the Burmans are the only problem in the country, you must use that field glass more carefully yet. In those crowded towns and villages along the railroad and the river, you can find in large numbers, besides the Burmans, three entirely different races. You can have forty Burmese-speaking missionaries in that division instead of four and yet leave these three races absolutely untouched.

First there are the Karens, 850,000 of them and not over 100,000 are Christians. Then there are the Chinese, in all the province some 120,000; two regular Methodist workers for them in Rangoon; some Baptist work sustained by the Rangoon City Mission Society; as much effort as possible through the imperfect channel of the Burmese language by

our own "shepherds of the 7,000,000"; some Catholic work; but that is all. And, most neglected of all, there are the Indian immigrants. Yes, the Anglican and Catholic churches are working for them; but then, they number 800,000, all under the gruelling tests of character which immigrants always face; enough to keep several missions busy. Our mission is meeting this need with *one* missionary family!

These four races, scattered everywhere through big towns and remote villages alike, are in a sense not unevangelized. But it is plain that the mere presence of four Burmese mission stations per 40,000 square miles, even if they were adequate for the Burmese work, could have nothing whatever to do with the evangelizing of this remaining million and a half of the population.

But this is only the beginning. The big problem lies in the hills, whither we shall now fly, — 100 miles north, up the Sittang valley. Turn the 'plane off to the right here at Toungoo and, striking out over the first ridge of the eastern yomas, go as far as the Salween River — the last of the six parallel sections. You will have to fly high, for you must clear a 5000 foot peak. The distance across is not much over fifty miles, as we fly, but below, you can see the way the missionary goes: motor road for twenty-five miles, then bad cart roads, and finally the most tortuous mountain foot-paths, up peak and down gorge, a journey of days.

Near the river at last you come to the Red Karens, — 19,000 of them, with a dialect all their own, spirit-worshippers in more than one sense of the word. They live crudely, stupidly, continuously drunken, at the starvation point. What little crops their rough mountains will yield they spend on gambling and lust. They are reached by white missionaries only a few times in a year and by Karen preachers only intermittently. To both they have proved peculiarly resistant — the responsive qualities of the Karen race as a whole apparently sodden over unrecognizably. A student in my class, who was the first Red Karen to enter college and was here only because his grandparents left the Red Karen hills and their moral atmosphere, said to me:

“It is not possible to convert the Red Karens. I know one of them who attended the theological seminary and then went back as a missionary, but the old life caught him and he has fallen back to be one of them.” It is true, as he went on to say, that the Catholics have made some converts among them, but these drink as much as before, and pay hardly any attention to Sunday or even to church-going.

Now speed up your engines and sail due north for about fifty miles. We are in the Shan States, piles upon piles of almost impassable mountains, where a missionary tour of any distance is a matter of weeks. The Shans, of course, are the chief people, — 660,000 in this tract alone. There are five sta-

tions to supply this need, *two of them unmanned.*

But this territory has been a catch-basin for each of the successive tribal migrations that have swept down from central Asia in the past centuries. Consequently, besides the Shans, there are in the northern and southern Shan States fully 500,000 members of other tribes, representing four entirely separate ethnological groups and scores of separate dialects. The needs of these we have attempted to supply by two *Shan-speaking* missionaries and by missionaries at three other stations. Of these stations one is vacant and one is heroically held alone by the widow of Dr. Truman Johnson. That is, we are trying to evangelize this region, bigger than Illinois, having a million and a half people and as many languages as a seaport city, with *three working mission stations.* Do you wonder that I call Burma still unevangelized?

But let us look at a few of these unevangelized — even untouched — peoples in detail.

(1) Northwest of Loikaw, the station "manned" by Mrs. Johnson, live the Goungdos — a tribe of Karen spirit-worshippers. Physically they are wild enough, but they are, in their own odd way, punctiliously moral. Unlike their neighbors, the Red Karens, they neither make nor drink liquor; they have the reputation of being strictly honest even in trading and it is certain that before brought under British rule they were accustomed to shoot a thief

on the spot. The same punishment they dealt out to an offender against marriage customs.

Here is an entire tribe, — their numbers unknown but large, who would make a signal addition to Christ's Kingdom. In Him their stern morality would find gentler fulfillment and their unhewn barbarity become nobility and efficiency. A man in Loikaw could reach these people, *but there is no man.*

(2) About halfway between Loikaw and Taunggyi, which is 60 bi-plane miles away, you will find a small lake. On its shores are 50,000 Inthas, that is—"sons of the lake." They are in many ways a splendid lot, of good physique and kindly nature; rather well-to-do; hospitable and eager to read, even their monks asking for tracts, and all listening attentively. But they are wholly unlike the Karen tribes to the south. Racially they are Burman hybrids of some sort and speak a hybrid Burmese. Religiously they are Buddhists. The missionaries in Loikaw and Taunggyi — the one a Karen, the other a Shan station — can only pass by these people as they go about their own work, and even in passing can get only an indirect and imperfect language communication. *But there is no male missionary at either of these stations.*

(3) Close to Taunggyi itself — indeed, all along the valley of the river and lake up which we have just passed — are 120,000 Tounghus. That means literally, mountain fellows. They are a Karen tribe,

who were apparently left here and in the mountains of Tenasserim when the more progressive Karens pressed down to the plains; but they, too, have their own dialect which cuts them off from our present missionaries. A man with a motor boat could meet hundreds of Toungthu boats at the weekly bazars all up and down the river. *But there is no man and no boat.*

(4) Passing Taunggyi now to the north and west, you will find the Danus. They, like the Inthas, are a Burman hybrid people, speaking a Burmese patois and found scattered over a wide region. They number 70,000 and 55,000 are within easy reach of Taunggyi and are reported as open and friendly. *But this station is "manned" by a woman who cannot travel among them.*

Let us now take a longer flight. Through the northern group of Shan States, past our empty station of Hsipaw, with the famous Ruby Mines lying to the west, we come into the Kachin Hills, where three of the long parallel sections adjoin, the western and eastern mountains and the Irrawaddy. Straight ahead on the river is Bhamo; to the east is Namkham; and north of Bhamo, nearly 300 miles as the 'plane goes and farther by rail, is Myitkyina. Beyond Myitkyina again, northern and eastern mountain-stretches, hundreds of miles long, seem to reach endlessly into the unexplored north and the almost as little known Chinese border. And even

west of the river there is a straight 200 miles before one comes to the wild frontier hills of Assam. These three, Bhamo, Namkham and Myitkyina are the only stations of any mission in this tract in which are found more than 160,000 Kachins. But the words of the single woman who is holding the Myitkyina field during the absence on furlough of the male missionary, show the challenge of the field.

"Our Kachin work here includes the Maru, Atsi and Lisu as well as the various dialects of Kachin. These are distinct languages and the people have, also, their own customs and characteristics. We have an evangelist, Ba Thaw, for the Lisu, the Burma Baptist Missionary Convention paying part of his salary. But as for the others, though a number have been reached through the Kachin work and we have a number of their Christians in our Kachin villages and several children in this school, nothing is being done for them as separate peoples. Concerning the numbers of these races the census report is inaccurate, as it does not include the recently annexed strip of more than 200 miles, the inhabitants of which are mostly Marus and Atsis. Ours is the only mission at work in this whole district. These people are all animists; their ignorance is absolute and their immorality unbelievable. But they are energetic and sturdy and friendly. The work for the Marus and Atsis should be undertaken separately from the Kachin work. They offer an immense and practi-

cally untouched field. If evangelists under the direction of the missionary of this station could undertake this distinctive work, I believe large numbers would soon enter the Kingdom. It is our opportunity, as no other Society is in contact with them and our workers already have their confidence, — which means everything in reaching such people. *The only obstacle is the lack of workers.*”

It is time we were turning back. Already you must see that Burma is not evangelized. Yet we have three more important tracts to visit on our return. Flying southwest from Myitkyina we shall come, after a flight of about 500 miles, to the Chin Hills. Massed in the northern hills and far southward through Arakan and the western Irrawaddy valley are 300,000 Chins. In the Irrawaddy valley and in Arakan, Catholics and Anglicans are at work, and we Baptists have in each of these districts one station. Yet our missionary in the Irrawaddy valley reports that in his 200 mile field, after five years of service, there are still some Christian Chins on the edge of the yoma whom he has never seen; and on the hills themselves he believes there are some among whom no work is being done, unless by the Catholics. But the most serious condition is in the Chin Hills themselves. Here are two stations, Haka and Tiddim. *The latter is vacant.* Haka is in charge of the widow of the missionary who established the

station. Her account ably describes the field:—

“Who? The Northern Chins.

“Where? Northwest from Pokokku, (on the Irrawaddy River) to the Manipur border and northern Arakan.

“Of what character? Most primitive, wild and uncivilized.

“How many? According to the last census, 119,556, in the portion of the Chin Hills administered from Falam. The only mission work done among these people is done by our Society. The Pokokku Hill Tracts contain 28,251 Chins among whom, so far as I know, no work is being done by any denomination; certainly there is no missionary. The northern Arakan Hill Tracts have a Chin population of 22,234 with no missionary of any denomination. The unadministered territory has a population of, it is believed by officials, at least 30,000; though no proper census has ever been taken. There has never been a missionary of any denomination among them.

“What obstacles? Lack of consecrated workers, both white and native.

“What prospects? So far as I know there is in the near future *no prospect* of any new missionaries for these almost two hundred thousand people.”

As we go on, we ought to take a glimpse, at least, of Arakan. We shall find that Chins are not by any means the only, not even the principal people here.

The Arakanese are a Burman hybrid people, well developed, strongly Buddhist, understanding Burmese but speaking a very puzzling dialect. Hence, though accessible from our Arakan Chin station, they can be reached only in a limited way by our one missionary there, whose chief work is among the Chins. Yet there are 250,000 of them and the only mission work among them is being done by the Catholics.

And how about Tenasserim? We have already noted that there are Tounghus there in large numbers. A run above the Tenasserim range, before we put to sea, will show us another people, the Talains, who belong to a different ethnological group from any we have seen yet. Had we looked sharp in the Shan States, we could have differentiated 170,000 of their general group among the many mixed tribes there; but most of them live here, close to the border of Siam whence they originally came. It is true that they are assimilating rapidly with the Burmese and that some day there may be no need of separate Talain work. *But at present there is only one man for the 320,000 and he returned in 1917 from an enforced furlough of two years.*

To sum up: It is true that in Burma the gospel has been preached for 100 years — that is, *to the Burmese race*. It is also true that in one section, and possibly in others, as many as fourteen mission stations can be found within 40,000 square miles.

But these facts do not make Burma "evangelized," for two reasons: —

(1) Because this section and all others on the plains, as well as some in the hills, are crowded not only with Burmans, but with Karens and Chinese and Indian immigrants. This mixture of characteristically and linguistically separated races splits the work of the fourteen and other similar stations at least in two, and usually leaves the Chinese and Indians very little touched, except by Catholics.

(2) Because the mountainous districts on three sides of Burma as well as the plains near the mountains are filled with scores of distinct tribes. Some of these belong to general ethnological groups that have not been connected since they left their original homes in Central Asia centuries ago. All of them vary so greatly in dialect and customs that they require separate workers. These tribes, especially those mentioned above — the Red Karens, Goundos and Tounthus, the Inthas and Danus, the Lisus, Atsis and Marus, and the Chins of the unadministered territory — *are practically or wholly unaffected by any Christian workers.*

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